



Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

August 23, 2020

* *Please stand if you are able*

Prelude

Gathering

Welcome and Lighting the Christ Candle

Acolyte: May the Holy Spirit unite us in worship, point us toward Jesus Christ, and inspire us to love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with God. Come, let us worship God.

* Liturgist: Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people both now and forevermore. *Psalm 125: 1-2*

All: Our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.
Psalm 124: 8

All Singing: 538 “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty”

Minister: To God’s people gathered in hope: Grace to you, mercy and peace, from God our Creator and Christ our Redeemer, through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

All: Amen.

Passing the Peace at a Distance

Reconciliation

Liturgist: I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

All: The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.

Liturgist: For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

All: We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to now. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for the redemption of our bodies.
Romans 8: 8-23

Silent confession and reflection

All Singing: 652 "I Lift My Eyes Up"

Liturgist: We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.

All: For those God foreknew he predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

Liturgist: And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.
Romans 8: 28-30

All: Thanks be to God in Christ.

Liturgist: Therefore, I urge you brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies, as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is true worship.

All: Let us not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds. That we will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Romans 12: 1-2 adapted

* **All Singing: 863 "Take My Life and Let it Be"**
Singing verses 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6

Proclamation

All: Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life! Help us to hear and obey what you say to us today. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

John 6: 68 adapted

Scripture: Matthew 16: 13-20

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you

loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Minister: The Word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

Sermon: At the Gates of Hell

* **All Singing: 770 “In Christ Alone”**

Dedication

Prayer

* **All Singing: 965 “Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow”**

Benediction

Praying with Elders – If you have a concern or joy that you’d like to talk or pray about with an Elder, one or two will be available in the shade near the sanctuary entrance following the service.

Worship Leaders

Pianist/Vocalist: Dora Diephouse
Flute: Lynn Hollender
Vocalist: Helen Van Wyck
Liturgist: Dan Diephouse
Sound Engineer: Schuyler Roozeboom
Minister: Roger Nelson

Hymns are from “Lift Up Your Hearts” (Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2013)
CCLI Copyright License 813746 | CCLI Streaming License 20253780 | OneLicense A-704612

Text: Matthew 16: 23-30
Title: At the Gates of Hell
Date: 08.23.20
Roger Allen Nelson

It's clear that place matters.

President Trump recently appeared at Mount Rushmore and plans to accept the Republican nomination from the White House. President Obama announced his run for the presidency from the site where Abraham Lincoln delivered his "House Divided" speech and this week he spoke from Philadelphia, the birthplace of the Constitution. Dr. Jill Biden spoke from a classroom. President Bush announced that the mission was "accomplished" in Iraq from the deck of a battleship. I proposed to Sandi under soft moonlight on a bridge in Paris.... Okay, actually it was on cold winter day in her parent's driveway by the side door into the kitchen, but you get the point, place matters.

While those are examples of political or romantic theater they suggest that the backdrop makes a difference. Where something takes place carries symbolic weight, points to historical or cultural touchstones, and tries to align the moment with some shared reality or commitment.

And, scripture is no different. Jesus and the gospel writers are aware of where they set the stage, position a story, or ask a question. Our text opens with,

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi...

So, if place matters, why there? What is significant about Caesarea Philippi as the setting for this exchange between Jesus and his disciples?

A little geography.

Israel is a bit smaller than New Jersey, but it has rolling green hills of fig and olive trees, barren brutal deserts, a snowy mountain top with a ski resort, miles of sandy ocean beaches, acidic salt flats, and rocky canyons. At the north end of Israel, near the border with Syria, there's a massive rocky mountain wall that's surrounded by thick forest, rugged nooks and crannies, and dark caves...

that lead to bottomless springs of water,
that become the tributaries feeding the Sea of Galilee,
that flows into the Jordan River,
which, like a main artery, runs the length of Israel.

I've been there. It's lush and verdant and fragrant and fertile. It feels like a root to life. And, while it's only about 25 miles from the villages where Jesus gathers his disciples, it is a vastly different place.

A little history.

The ancient Greeks understood those caves and fresh water springs to be an entrance to the underworld and the residence of Pan, the god of the wild, or of fertility. You can still see the ruins of the temples that were built there. As one historian writes:

They were so enamored with the spot that sanctuaries were built to worship the god Pan, worship which included cultic sex, bestiality, and animal sacrifices.... It was so wicked, a sin city like today's Las Vegas, that rabbis forbade a good Jew to go there.

After the Romans overran Israel, Herod the Great built three temples to honor Caesar Augustus: one in the south, one along the coast, and one in the north - in front of the temples built to Pan. When he died Herod willed the region to his son Philip – who built up the city there, thus: Caesarea Philippi.

So, when Jesus asks his disciples,

But what about you? Who do you say that I am?

The backdrop is a setting for pagan worship and a temple built to honor the emperor. He was at the gates of hell and in the belly of the beast.

Place matters.

This is no innocent inquiry in an ivory tower.

This is no freewheeling conversation among friends over beers.

This is no speculative discourse.

This is where all the chips are on the table and the answer carries import for heaven and hell.

Does that seem like too much?

Too dramatic?

A little over the top?

Dear friends, this exchange stands as one of great Christological confessions of the Gospels. Jesus asks who they think he is and bold-impetuous Peter blurts out,

You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

Earlier in Matthew Jesus is referred to as “Lord,” “Teacher,” and even, “Son of David,” but this is the confessional climax of Matthew’s gospel. This is the turning point in how Matthew tells the story of Jesus. This is Peter going all in.

And Jesus responds that Peter is blessed, not because he came to that on his own, but because it was revealed to him by the “Father in heaven.”

In response to that confession, Jesus proclaims that he will build his church and that it will prevail against hell itself. As John Buchanan puts it:

I believe, with everything in me, that he was perfectly serious when he left us that vivid, powerful image of the church standing against the gates of hell, the power of death itself. I think the stakes are that high. To be blunt about it, death's what we have to contend with, is it not? Death is the shadow that falls into every life. The gates of Hades, “are a

symbol for everything that opposes God's will: the powers of death and destruction that ravage human life."

Hard to make the stakes much higher.
Hard to get more dramatic.

Jesus engages in a little word play with Peter's name as the place upon which his church will be built. And it would be easy to get lost in the weeds about what the keys to loose and bind are all about, or why the instruction to keep his messianic identity a secret, but I want to sit a little longer with this moment of confession.

Let's come at it this way.

High Fidelity was first a novel by Nick Hornby, then a movie set in Chicago starring John Cusack and a young Jack Black, then a musical, and most recently a series on a Hulu. The story revolves around the love life of a record store owner and one recurring motif is the making of the perfect mix tape. (Do you remember those?)

A mix tape is a collection of songs that captures the spirit of a relationship or the ethos of a moment. It takes time to carefully curate an original list of songs, in the right order, that communicates something about your sense of things. I have friends that can talk for hours about the mix tapes....

Well, a friend recently surprised me with a mix tape (on a CD) of songs that speak into the tumult of these times. Mix tapes are a lost art; it was a great gift. One song, that was new to me, stood out. These are the lyrics of the chorus:

*My first allegiance is not to a flag, a country, or a man
My first allegiance is not to democracy or blood
It's to a king and a kingdom*

In Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks his disciples about primary allegiance. With the expectations of the empire and the lure of other gods as the backdrop, Jesus essentially asks if their allegiance is to flag, country, or man. To a form of government or to blood?

But, who do you say that I am?

Dear friends, I'm painfully aware of the tense politically charged nature of our time. I hear frequently of the anxiety, anger, uncertainty, and fear that's just under the surface. We feel torn asunder. And in a few months, we will cast votes in what has been described as the most crucial election in American history.

May this morning's text serve as a reminder that
our primary allegiance,
our first commitment,

our most essential confession is about a king and a kingdom.

Election cycles will come and go, empires will rise and fall, there may even be hell to pay, but we are united by far more than divides. For ultimately, our only comfort in life and in death is that we belong to Jesus Christ.

And if there is some throne of judgement, if there is some sort of sorting out, if we stand before the pearly gates or at the entrance to the underworld... flag, country, or man won't matter. Blood or democracy will be found wanting. If we're called to give a final accounting: all our efforts at being good enough, or right enough, or rich enough won't amount to squat....

I'm not a very good Christian. I come up short by all measures of orthodoxy and orthopraxis. If asked what I have to offer, or what I have to say for myself, I'll be empty handed and mute. I've got nothing.

So, I'm with Peter.

I'm going all in.

I'm banking on a king and a kingdom.

You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

For the gates of hell will not prevail and even death itself will not have the last word.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.